

Female Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College -- the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new and even have a little fun along the way!

Kevin Walthers: Hello, welcome to Hancock Conversations. I'm Kevin Walthers, Superintendent/President of Allan Hancock College. Today our guest is Wally Ajanel. Wally is the owner of Bicycle Works in San Luis Obispo. He opened Bicycle Works after he came here from Guatemala in 1994, fleeing the Civil War, right?

Wally Ajanel: Correct, yes.

KW: So, you came up, you found yourself on the Central Coast. You were headed to Canada, when you first started.

WA: That's right, that was the intention, but I got stuck in Santa Maria somehow.

KW: Were you stuck or did you like it here?

WA: No, I really liked it here, because it's a small community and I was able to commute by bicycle, but I realized that I needed to learn the language, even though I could navigate my own language to Spanish. But everywhere I went, they said, "Oh you need to at least speak a little English in order to hire you," so that gave me the fuel to look into coming to Hancock.

KW: So, tell us a little bit -- what year was it when you came to Hancock?

WA: So, I came to Santa Maria in 1997. And I think about, sorry, the end of 96, and then, as soon as I came, secondly I was looking for classes, but I guess people thought I was crazy. But it was after Thanksgiving Day, so it's all Cuesta has closed. And so, I investigated the time that they were opening. So, I think January was the first time for ESL classes and like, I signed up right away. And the idea is that, to have the class open, they need a minimum I think of 10 or 12 students. So, I had like 15 roommates that would live in this house. And I used to beg them to come, and they would want to come to class, just to fill in the class, so they could teach the class. Because they didn't believe me, it was free back then. So, and I was enjoying because living in Guatemala, I attempt to go to school there for English only. And it was always expensive for to pay a private school to learn English, and here it was free. And I could not believe it because it's free. And I said, "I wasn't used to that." So, I really took advantage of it.

KW: That's good. It's still free today, we still offer ESL as a free class today for our students.

WA: But most people don't know. Because coming here, I couldn't find a job, so most of the guys that I met on the street said, "I work strawberry, or broccoli, or only in the fields." So, I follow one of them to strawberry and I end up working there for seven months. And I used to get up at five in the morning, be there at six, and come to class, seven until nine, every single day. But most of them were not aware that was free. But, I found out it was free.

KW: So today we've got a brand-new building that serves all of our ESL students, so we have real classrooms, but that's not what you went to, right?

WA: No.

KW: Tell us about your classroom.

WA: The old classroom?

KW: Yeah, the old classroom.

WA: Yeah, the old classroom. I guess it was more like, now that I'm aware of what type of buildings that are in the US, it looked almost like a shipping container. And it was on the corner of campus, by the train tracks, I think it was. And so, I was never able to be into the middle campus, until somebody say, "You need to be into regular classes." But that's why I started looking into getting into math and more advanced English classes.

KW: Right. So, ultimately you finished at Hancock, you went to Cuesta. So, we're not gonna spend a lot of time talking about Cuesta. But then you opened your own bicycle shop. Tell us about your bicycle shop.

WA: So, growing up in Guatemala, I was always interested in bicycles. I started racing and then wrenching on bicycles, and then coming up here I didn't think it was an actual business. But, yet, being at Hancock and able to leave me here, I worked in different places here, and I worked a little bicycle shop in Santa Maria, which opened the doors for me. And since I was able to communicate in English with customers, going on to San Luis Obispo, it allowed me to see that the market that was there for bicycles. So, I ended up working for a company in San Luis Obispo for 10 years. I ran the place, and then I was able to, obviously I kept taking classes at Cuesta and some Cal Poly as well. And just to, to improve my skills from math, English, computer classes and I wanted to be ready to have a business, so it took me 10 years to work all that up.

KW: So, did you buy the business or did you start your own?

WA: I got offers to buy the business, but where I come from, I guess we were born merchants, so we believe in building your own from scratch, anyone. I wanted that, so that's the thing. I mostly thought about it. So, I started from the bottom with a \$20,000 start up. And they thought I was crazy because... I did it in 2005, but now we're 2020, so.

KW: So, 15 years.

WA: 15 years.

KW: How much is the most expensive bike in your shop now.?

WA: The most expensive we have sold, like \$22,000. The average price is about \$3,000 to \$5,000 for the high-end road bikes. And then, obviously we have a lot less expensive ones, but that's the market that I'm targeting.

KW: So, you started the business with \$20,000, and now you sell bicycles that cost more than your whole startup cost?

WA: Correct, yes. But English has been the number one key – being able to communicate, to write. And especially nowadays, I use my iPhone or my iPad to communicate, because we do have customers all over the US, some from, also Europe.

KW: What's the biggest challenge for people wanting to use their bicycles in this part of the country?

WA: There's not a challenge, I think a lot of times, it's not knowing the etiquettes of riding a bicycle or the laws that come with it. But I don't think there's a challenge. It's the easiest thing to get around when I live in Santa Maria. That's how I move around, just by bicycle.

KW: So, do you ride on the sidewalk or on the street?

WA: You have to obey the laws like driving a car, so you have to ride on the street.

KW: I agree with you. Drives me crazy, you see those people riding their bicycles in the wrong way on the sidewalk.

WA: That's right, it's dangerous, because as a driver, you follow the signals of traffic laws. And so, you don't expect somebody coming against your oncoming traffic.

KW: So what kind of bike are you riding?

WA: Oh, that's a good question. I have several bikes now, but lately, the biggest thing has been the electrical assist bikes. So, I commute with one of those. And on long rides we have a road bike, and we have mountain bikes too, for off-road, if you have to go off-road.

KW: Nice, nice. So, what were you doing to make a living? You said you worked a little bit in the strawberry fields. What else did you do?

WA: So, I worked in the strawberry field and then I also had a part-time job at one of the Dollar Marts in SLO. And ironically, because I knew English, most of the workers that were from different countries didn't speak the language. So, one day I'm unloading a truck. I guess the owner overheard that somebody answered in English and tried to figure out who I was. I came to him, and so I worked for him and then I ended up opening a store down the street for them. I also learned how to make donuts, I worked at a local donut shop here. So, I was doing that, and I attempted to work in a radio station here locally. But, there was not enough time for me to be there. I did several jobs. But whatever, I cleaned houses, I worked with carpenters on the side job, doing cleaning, doing whatever they had to do. I had several jobs, but minimum two or three.

KW: That's good. So yeah, if you're gonna make donuts probably having a bicycle is a good idea. It's --

WA: Well, I grew up baking with my dad, so it kind of turned out to be easier than baking sweet or French bread.

KW: So, yeah, cool. So, you got a family, kids here?

WA: Yeah, so I got married in 1999 with my sweet wife, Alissa. So, we have two boys, one is 16 years, one is 19, and then my oldest one right now is at UC Riverside. He studied Electrical Engineering.

KW: So, you taught the kids that are going to college is the way to make their future?

WA: So, our sons, we tell them, college is not for everyone, but they realize that they have the skills to do it. And so, my youngest one wants to study writing movies and stuff.

KW: So, film studies program?

WA: Film studies, yes, right. So, he's done it and won the first place with San Luis Obispo High School last year, his movie from scratch.

KW: Great. All right. What are you planning on doing with your shop in the future?

WA: Well, right now we're working on a plan for a five-year expansion. So, we're gonna focus on how to do outlets for bicycle rentals, and that's one of the segments that's growing for us. And we're gonna focus on that.

KW: What kind of rentals would those be? Would they be like those jump bikes that I see around, or they going to be more traditional?

WA: No, more traditional. So, we usually we work with five-star hotel venues, and we provide the equipment for them and they rent to their own guests. And so, and that's one segment that we've been working on five years, now. So, it's already proven that works. So, now we're going to move into more locations.

KW: Awesome. That's great. Well, you know, we say at Hancock you start here, you can go anywhere. So, certainly you're a perfect example of a student that started here, and is doing really well now.

WA: Yes, I am really grateful for those classes because it really helped me to learn how to navigate in this world, it's very different than where we come from, so opportunities are there. We just got to realize that there's only one way, knowing the language where we live in order to succeed.

KW: Great. All right, so we've got a set of lightning round questions for you, easy questions. Now these are easy, just fun. So, what's your favorite carnival food?

WA: Popcorn.

KW: Popcorn. All right. You ever seen 'The Godfather?'

WA: I haven't, no.

KW: Alright so you're gonna be a Star Wars guy, Godfather, or Star Wars movie?

WA: Star Wars, my sons' favorite.

KW: Tell me, what's the fastest you've ever driven a car?

WA: A hundred and ten miles an hour.

KW: Oh really? Where was that?

WA: I went to Vegas.

KW: How fast have you gone on a bicycle?

WA: 70 kilometers per hour.

KW: Wow, that's a lot, right?

WA: Uh huh. So, I've done Cuesta Grade. I did it one time on a Sunday with no traffic. It was a 55. And then I realized the CHP was the bottom. It happened to be a customer of mine, he said don't kill yourself.

KW: So, my craziest time ever, I was riding my bike down a big hill, up in the Bay Area. And I was going about 35 miles an hour down this hill, and the front wheel started to wobble. And I got the bike stopped and I pulled over and I realized I hadn't locked the front of the tire.

WA: The wheel release was loose?

KW: I had, yeah, the whole wheel release was loose, I was just on gravity. So, yeah, the only time I ever fell over on my bike, though, I was going zero miles an hour.

WA: That's when it hurts the most.

KW: Yeah, it's kind of embarrassing too. You're at a stop light and the next thing you know, you're laying on the ground. Everybody's looking at you like, 'What's wrong with you?'

WA: I know, seriously.

KW: Alright, well, Wally, we're grateful for you being here today. This is an exciting business that you have going. We love the idea that a Hancock alum is up in SLO doing some good work, and having successful business, so thanks for coming in today.

WA: And thank you for the opportunity, I'm grateful for it.

KW: All right, well that's Hancock Conversations for today. And we thank everybody for listening. Thanks, Wally.

WA: Thank you.